

Multi-Agency ECR Evaluation Study: Overview

Introduction

New insights into the performance of environmental conflict resolution (ECR) are emerging from a multi-agency evaluation study (MAES) led by the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution (U.S. Institute). MAES was designed to shed light on how ECR performs, identify key factors that contribute to ECR success, and distill feedback from participants and practitioners so that future processes can be improved. Preliminary highlights from MAES are summarized in this piece.

Background

Since 1999, the U.S. Institute has engaged federal agency partners and, through the Policy Consensus Initiative (PCI), state agency partners in developing an evaluation framework and data collection instruments to more systematically evaluate ECR. To test the framework and advance broader use of these evaluation tools, the U.S. Institute launched MAES with funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and several federal agency partners. The U.S. Institute managed the collection and merging of case evaluation data from multiple agencies, including a number of cases identified by independent case practitioners. In all, post process survey data were collected on 52 cases from 523 participants and 58 practitioners. These cases from across the country were completed between late 2005 and early 2007. The cases focused on environmental, natural resource or public lands issues, and were agreement-seeking processes guided by neutral third parties. A diverse mix of ECR applications are represented in the data set. Examples include developing and revising natural resource plans, siting and constructing facilities, negotiating government rules, and resolving disputes in the context of administrative appeals or litigation.

Covering new ground

It is commonly acknowledged that ECR evaluations tend to focus on what can be easily measured, such as settlement rates and participant satisfaction, at the expense of ultimate outcomes such as changed relationships, conflict management behaviors, and improved environmental outcomes. The evaluation framework that underpins MAES covers the life cycle

of an ECR process, encompassing the initial determination of whether or not ECR is appropriate, the execution of the collaborative process, and the achievement of ECR outcomes and impacts. The evaluation framework is constructed in the form of a logic model. More than 50 researchers, practitioners, program managers, and evaluators from the ECR field were engaged in articulating the working principles of ECR and in designing the framework. Evaluation questions based on the framework elicited information on the independent accomplishments of ECR as well as the relative merits of ECR compared to other alternative forums for public decision making or dispute resolution. The findings, at the case and aggregate levels, will be helpful in demonstrating the specific value of ECR, the basis for investing in ECR, and some of the factors and dynamics that drive ECR success. Learning from MAES findings will help improve future applications of ECR.

More detailed background on MAES will be reported in a forthcoming article in *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* in early 2008.

Shedding light on ECR performance

Among the early take-home messages are the positive perspectives shared by the majority of respondents:

- ECR resulted in progress on solving the environmental problems/resolving the environmental issues;
- ECR processes significantly improved relationships and built trust among stakeholders; and
- More progress and better outcomes were achieved through ECR than alternative processes, such as litigation.

Further analysis of ECR performance is now underway, including an exploration of why differing perspectives regarding “agreement reached” often exist among stakeholders (another emerging theme from our initial cases analysis). Additionally, this effort will distill the commonly cited factors that participants and practitioners identified as having helped and/or hindered their efforts. A catalogue of ECR performance indicators will also be created to set the stage for follow-up tracking of long-term impacts of ECR.

Factors contributing to ECR success

In addition to assessing ECR performance, one of the primary objectives of this evaluation effort is to better understand the factors that contribute to ECR success. Specifically, the 52 case evaluations are being used to test the working theory of ECR (as captured in the evaluation framework), and to determine which of the factors under the control of project managers and practitioners are the strongest contributors to ECR success.

This part of the analysis uses multi-level modeling, a methodology widely recognized as the preferred way to analyze grouped data. This approach is appropriate for conflict resolution evaluation as it takes into consideration the fact that respondents are not independent of each other; indeed it is reasonable to assume that respondents for a specific case are working in a common context. This assumption has important statistical implications accounted for by multi-level modeling. MAES represents the first application of multi-level modeling to the analysis of ECR.

Using multi-level modeling, we tested the relationships among the factors in the evaluation model to better understand which factors are the strongest contributors to ECR success. For this analysis, we looked at three dimensions of ECR success: (1) reaching agreement, (2) creating quality agreements, and (3) improving participants' capacity to work together. Our preliminary results suggest that four factors stand out as key contributors to all three dimensions of ECR success:

- The extent to which participants are willing to collaborate at the beginning of the process,
- The relative challenge of the case as reported by the mediator/facilitator,
- The extent to which participants are effectively engaged, and
- The level of mediator/facilitator skills and practices.

It was also found that the extent to which relevant high quality information was integrated into the process strongly influenced the quality of the agreement.

A more detailed analysis of findings is being prepared for publication and will be presented at the ECR2008 Conference held in Tucson, May 20-22.

Conclusion

Increasing the appropriate and effective use of ECR necessitates a better demonstration of the value of ECR, and a better understanding of why some processes are more successful than others. What is emerging from this evaluation effort is a performance-based account of what can be accomplished with ECR, how ECR compares to alternative processes such as litigation, and key pointers on what drives success and how ECR can be improved. The results should translate into a better articulation of when and how ECR can create workable solutions to environmental conflicts.

Disclaimer

The perspectives expressed in this piece are those of U.S. Institute staff, Patricia Orr, Dale Keyes and Kirk Emerson, and draw on the work of evaluation consultant Kathy McKnight. The perspectives expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the data contributors, nor do they reflect the institutional perspective of the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution. Any errors or omissions are solely the responsibility of the authors.